Earl & Helen Santo

Helen and Earl Santo at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose

"We've got to help the community, wherever or however we can. And it is to our benefit, too that people come in for different activities. Some of the new people that move into town, they come to the different activities and then it pays off for everyone."

Any visit to the quaint neighborhood of San Jose's Japantown often necessitates that you visit at least one of three institutions: the manju shop Shuei-Do, family favorite restaurant Gombei, and Santo Market. Serving the community since 1946, Santo Market is a haven of fresh poke, Asian produce and meats, and their legendary (and quickly sold out) strawberry mochi, where they nestle one huge, ripe strawberry in the middle of sweet red bean.

Behind the store's longstanding legacy are Earl and Helen Santo, who have kept it a family business since Earl's uncle began it immediately following the end of the war. Seeing a growing need to serve the resettling Japanese American population, he sought to stock the store with tastes familiar to the community, including those that were often missing in camp: soy sauce and rice. As Earl and Helen were both children during camp, their memories are laced with the innocence of living among other children, unaware of the hardship that befell their parents. But now as parents (and grandparents) themselves, their reflections encapsulate their pride for their children's accomplishments, especially as it pertained to getting college degrees.

Earl Santo

Earl could you introduce yourself? Just say your full name and where you were born, where you grew up.

Earl Shizuo Santo. Born in San Jose, March 2nd 1931.

So tell me what a typical day was like for you growing up in San Jose before the war.

Well all my life we were on the farm. My family raised vegetables. So everyone worked something or other. It might have been just folding newspapers. And they don't do it anymore but the newspapers were actually

folded and sewn together and made a sleeve around the celery to keep it bleached, more or less. So we were one of the crew that had to straighten those out during the off-season and I learned to drive our truck, I think I must have been only eight or nine out on the field, and so you know, a lot of open spaces. As Pearl Harbor came, I recall I was with my older brother, John, who was four years older than I, and it was just bad news for us. And I really don't remember much after that, what we did.

And your parents were Issei?

Issei.

And where were they from in Japan?

They were from Shimane-ken. And that's actually over the hill from Hiroshima towards Japan's seaside. And that's what they call inaka [country]. Their living was more farming and whatever.

And did you have a big family? A lot of siblings?

Well, yes. There actually were seven of us, all boys. Yeah, poor mom, huh? But two of the brothers, I think they were about three or five but they got sick. Oh, what kind of illness? Whatever it was, both of them passed away about a week apart. As young kids. So there was five of us boys left. I guess the oldest, gee we must have had about not quite 20 years difference in age.

Oh really?

I think. So I guess in those days the families were big. I think they liked the help on the farm, I guess.

Right. You were farming and it really helped the parents. And so when Pearl Harbor happened, you were how old at the time?

I was ten.

You were ten. So you were in school. You were in about fifth grade?

Yes, that’s right. Sixth grade, I guess.

Did you experience anything at school? Did anything change for you after that?

Not really, I really don't recall any of the — what do you call it, discussions or whatever. Nothing much happened at school that I could remember. And we were a majority. The Japanese were majority because the farmers that surrounded the school district were farmers.

And Japanese.

Right.

And since we're doing this for the [JAMsj] museum, where exactly in San Jose was your farm? Where were you living?

Actually on North First Street which was called Alviso Road in those days, and actually it's not too far from the freeway. The freeway and First Street. I don't think we were probably a mile down north of the intersection there.

Wow. So right here.

Right here. San Jose.

And so when the Executive Order came out, what did your family do to prepare for evacuation?

I don't know. There seemed to be a lot of I guess — everyone's talking about it and trying to gather up things that we were asked to have with us. I guess eating utensils and stuff. I remember my parents having to go gather up some things like that. And then the destination to Heart Mountain, I don't know when it was given, but we had to get some cold weather clothes.

So you knew, your parents prepared for harsh, cold weather?

I think we must have got the information.

I see. And did your parents talk to you and your siblings before you left?

Boy. No, I don't recall any of that. But I know they were, I guess, throwing away different things of value to us. But we shouldn't have them on hand, I guess. I guess anything pertaining to the Japanese government was not allowed. And then I didn't think about it but when we left, we left the house as is pretty much so the beds were there, the tables were there, refrigerator and everything. We had no idea who — well, I'm sure they made use of it, whoever farmed.

Do you remember your first impressions of the assembly center in Santa Anita? And living there?

Oh boy. I guess we knew there were horse stables that people were going to be living in. I guess we were lucky ones. We moved into the new barracks. And our barrack I remember was located right on the edge of the camp buildings and stuff. Right across the fence was a road to Arcadia, that's the city that's close by.

So you were not in the stables, but you heard of people living there?

Right. Like I said we were lucky there, the people in the stables, I know they complained about the smell. To me that'd be pretty awful to have to live in that.

And then what do you remember about leaving Santa Anita and making that trek to Heart Mountain?

Not too much, as far as I remember. But we did board a train. And I guess on the train they had restrictions on using the blackout curtains and I guess there were soldiers, security on there. And a sad part of this is one of the family friends, older man, he passed away. It could have been that he was a heavy drinker. And who knows what may have happened to cause this death.

On the train, you mean?

On the train.

And that was a family friend of your parents?

Yes.

I **see. So at this point you were about eleven now. Right?**

Right.

So did you have a sense that this was all really bad or negative or were just kind of confused?

Well yes, the latter. More confused and really listening to what was really going on. We at least had our family. We were all together. And I heard there were some of the families, the father or brother, they were put in these separate camps, I guess. And I guess eventually they were able to get together with their family.

But you were lucky your family stayed together as one. So what were your first impressions of Heart Mountain?

Well, let's see. Barren, I guess you might say. There were a lot of sagebrushes and sand and stuff, but nothing growing at that time. After getting used to things, we were able to make friends. See, as people coming from the farm, we weren't able to play with other kids and it brought a lot of new friends. So that's where being at my age at that time wasn't the awful things that's happening.

Right. You had more friends you could play with.

Right.

And were your parents working in camp? What did they do?

My dad was assigned or maybe it was his job, he took care of the boiler rooms. He had to make sure the charcoal was there to heat up the water. I'm not sure what else he did but my mother didn't do any work.

And had she been farming, helping with the farming before in San Jose?

Oh yes.

Do you feel that in some ways, looking at a silver lining, it was a positive thing for her? I've heard a lot of people say that since the women had to raise the children *and* work the farm —

Yes. I was number seven. Yes, she worked hard out on the field. One of the things she was doing a lot of was, cauliflower. It's a white flower and leaves. So they used to tie the cauliflower on top, to keep them from getting sunburned. I think as time went on they improved the seeds where it would grow and cover it much better. And what else did she do? Well, of course, the boys were all big enough to take care of themselves, I guess. Two brothers, one was too old for the draft and then the other one had a 4-F designation, which is a handicap.

I see. But he was draft age, basically?

Yes, right.

So when the loyalty questionnaire came out, what do you remember about the way that your father and mother answered?

You know, I really don't know how that questionnaire affected us. I don't remember too much of that. I think I mentioned that I did have relatives that were resisters, too.

Were they relatives of your mother or your father?

My mother's side.

I see. But you stayed in Heart Mountain so they must have answered yes/yes?

Yes, I guess so. I don't know.

Are there any other standout memories from Heart Mountain that you have?

Cold winters. I think we were down to -28 or something. And then one of the other things that everyone had to do was wrap the door handles because the metal would freeze and stick. And we'd go to the bathroom and brush our teeth and wash our hair and the hair gets all frozen [*laughs*]. So the weather was bad, I'd say. Summer was on the hot side and dry and dusty.

Two extremes coming from the Bay Area. Now health-wise, was everyone in your family okay?

Yes.

That's good, because some people got really sick from the weather.

Right.

So you went through school and did you finish middle school?

Yes, that's it, I guess. Seventh, eighth, ninth grades. When I came back I was a sophomore I guess.

So coming back to San Jose, you resettled back here?

Yes.

Was the reason because your parents were already familiar with it or did they just feel like it would be better to come back? Or do you know why they chose —

I think they were familiar with it and we had farm equipment that was being held by a very good family that helped us. It's not that they didn't use it, so they in turn benefited some, using the equipment.

But they held onto it for you.

Yes.

They were really good people. But you lost the house though that you were in?

Oh yes. The house that we lived in, I don't know what happened. But when you start building a house, a lot of help comes from your friends and relatives. So they helped build the house that I remember, and that house travelled quite a bit. They put it on wheels and towed it over about half a mile through the fields and then situated there. And then we stayed there for probably about three or four years and then we moved again. Same deal. Put the house on wheels and moved it across to where Fry's Electronics is on Brokaw. We were farming that area just when the war started.

And coming back to San Jose, what do you remember about those first few months? Where did you live?

Well, it wasn't really nice quarters but my auntie, dad's older sister, had property and they had a nice house, modern. And they had a workers' house and that wasn't very nice, but I think we might have spent around two months before they found a place to buy and continue farming.

Wow, they got on their feet pretty quickly.

Yes.

Do you remember, now that you were in high school, coming back and being a young teenager, do you remember any backlash or discrimination that faced you or your family?

Not, hardly any discrimination at school, but I remember this one thing that I guess we had homerooms and the first fellow I met, in fact I ran into him last year sometime. I really think he helped the Japanese a lot. Like my family, my second oldest brother was involved in sports and this fellow was a basketball player. And in fact he did real well at San Jose State. But anyway, he turned out to be the most nicest person. And in school, I've never heard of anyone having problems with discrimination. So outside of school, I recall we went to the movies, I guess, with, it must have been three or four of us kids and I guess we did get some of those loud people calling us names. But that was the extent of it, yeah.

That was it. And a lot of people came back to San Jose.

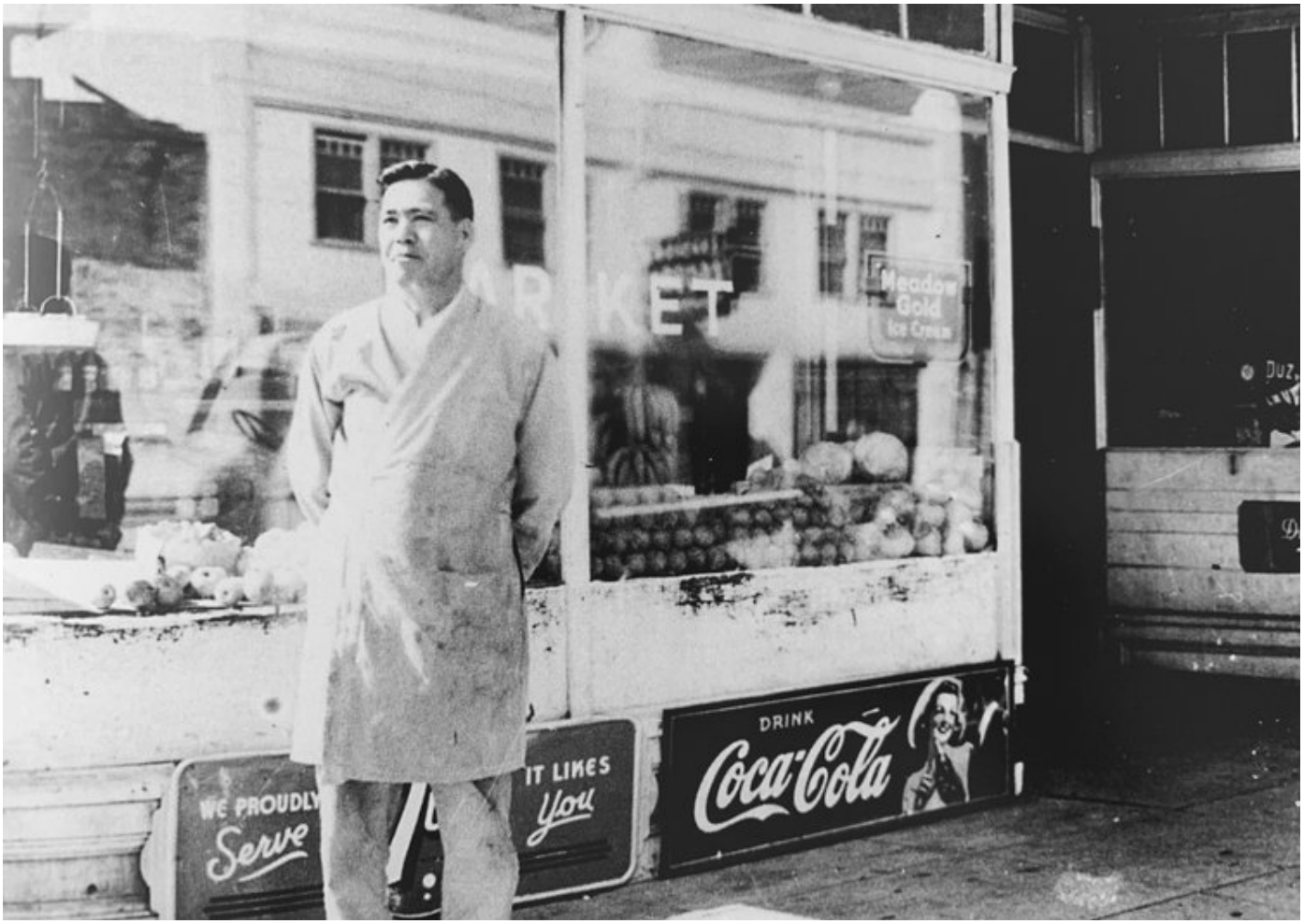
Right.

So when you moved back here, were you still near Japantown?

We were on Tenth Street, which is a couple miles from Japantown. And I guess my uncle, he's the one that bought the small grocery store. And he started the Santo Market.

So your uncle was the one.

Yes. I guess he didn't want to farm anymore.



Yoshijiro and his wife, Misaye were the first owners of Santo Market (then Santo Grocery), at 248 Jackson Street. Photo courtesy of Japanese American Museum of San Jose

Because it was a natural link between farming and then opening a grocery store for him?

Yes.

This was which uncle? On which side of the family?

My dad's younger brother.

And so where was the first original market?

At the corner of 6th and Jackson. It was owned by this Filipino man and a lot of the products were not for the Japanese people but my uncle bought the business, and then after a few months moved over to a larger space right next door. And he fixed it up to sell regular groceries. Japan import items were very scarce then. But I guess eventually things like soy sauce and rice we had to get on the list for. Not rations, but to able to get some products to sell. Even rice was sort of scarce. At that time, I don't know if you heard of, they had these coupons for meat and sugar and different things. And that was a hassle I would say.

Right. So how did your uncle, as far as you know, get all these items? Like how was he able to get his inventory to sell?

At first, I'm not sure. But the Japanese items, we then started seeing these Japanese wholesalers come around and they were handling whatever they had available. I guess the important things were shōyu, the soy sauce, and rice. I remember even the rice wasn't too plentiful. And especially the kind of rice the Japanese like, the sticky California rice. I guess they brought in a lot of rice from Arkansas. And I do recall, when I started to help him, we had to take the truck to the warehouse. And these were 100 pound bags of rice. And we loaded onto the pickup and back into the store warehouse. So it wasn't for anyone with a bad back, I'll tell you that.

How old were you when you started helping?

I think I did a little bit when I was probably around a senior in high school. So 17, 18.

And I'm assuming that it successful from the start, right? Was he one of the first people to open, re-open a grocery store?

No, actually there was Dobashi market. They were open from back in 1910 or ‘15.

So, talking a little bit more about the market; it's been in your family this whole time. So your uncle had it, and then when did that get passed on to you? When was that transition?

Well, let me go back. My uncle George had adopted my older brother, since he didn’t have any children. His name was Roy. And then I don’t know how I got caught in this, but I had got caught in the draft. Went to the military for two years.

What year was this?

This was the Korean thing there, 1952 to 1954.

Oh wow. So you served in the Korean War?

You might call it that. For every one out there, there must be about twenty back. I'm one of the twenty in the back. But anyway the Korean War there, I guess they had this draft. I started at San Jose State but then I must have messed up and I dropped off figuring the draft was gonna get me, and actually yes, in 1952 I was drafted. And I served two years.

I guess it was during that time that my uncle decided to build another store, since the other Japanese stores were rebuilding, too. I guess Dobashi market they were here, but then, we were here, but then they moved right almost next door. So my uncle decided to look for something that he liked and he did find this lot on the corner of Sixth and Taylor. And well anyway, my older brother, he wasn't quite an architect yet, but he did the drawings for the store. For the new store. So that was in 1954 and it opened up in 1955. So it was about at that time that I was pretty much getting involved with helping out

I see.

Earl and his son, Mark in the ‘90s. Photo courtesy of the Santo Family

And I guess there had to be someone that could take care of the meat department. So I went to business friends, they had a butcher shop and he pretty much drew some plans on how to do this. Breaking down the meat for selling and things. So that was back in ‘55. And that was a new experience. And I think that we had some help from these Chinese people that had one of the busiest meat markets in town. It was called State Meat Market. And I got to know them because we used to buy meat from them. And they were very good about showing me different tricks and stuff.

So when you came back from the service, did you return to school at all or did you just go straight into working?

I went straight into working. That was something I wonder about. I probably should’ve gone to school. But didn’t.

What were you planning on studying or what interested you in school?

Well, nothing particular, so that was another problem. I didn’t have any plans of what I might like.

Now I'm curious about the impact of being incarcerated for your family and your parents. After the war was over, did your parents ever talk to you and your brothers about anything or did they just kind of stay quiet?

I think they were more of a stay quiet type of people. And I guess the word, shikata ga nai [it can’t be helped] I guess, what can you do? Yeah.

When you received your redress and the Civil Liberties Act passed, what were your feelings about that?

Oh wow, let's see. I felt that especially the older folks who suffered the most, a lot of them were gone already. And I thought that was too bad and actually, the $20,000 especially to the older folks that lost so much property anyway was insufficient.

That wasn't enough.

Yeah. And this doesn't concern us but a good friend of ours was from Peru and I thought, "Boy, they got it worse!" Because they actually used some of the internees for prisoner exchange. That was horrible.

Are you speaking about Art [Shibayama] by any chance?

Art, yes. We got to know him pretty well.

Are there any other thoughts, anything else you want to share about your experience and reflections on this?

Well, I think the hardest hit were the Isseis, they lost so much. And the next group, being the people that were in college or ready to go to college that got disrupted by not being able to continue right away. And then in my grade level it wasn't interrupted too badly. We went on. And most of us I guess handled the change pretty well. We didn't miss out that much education in camp. I think we must have had pretty good teachers and all.

Helen Santo

Helen could you introduce yourself with your full name, your birthday and where you were born?

Helen Hiroko Kodama, now Santo. I was born October 26th, 1935. So I must have been seven when the war broke out. And I always thought I was born in Los Angeles but someone stole our box with all our birth certificates. But

I found out that it was Norwalk. I knew my parents lived in different places but I always considered myself from Los Angeles.

And that actually was a pretty big Japanese American community, right? Norwalk had a lot of Japanese?

I really have no idea. I was so young back then.

So what were your parents doing?

They were farmers. Routine farmers.

And were they Issei?

My mother was born in Hawai'i, and my dad was born in Japan, Hiroshima.

So your parents were farming in Norwalk.

In Norwalk and Compton and my most vivid memory is Long Beach. So I always thought I was born in the area of Long Beach but apparently it was way before then. Going back, I don't know when it was, a number of years ago, we had some remodeling done in the house. We didn't realize this box that was in the bathroom in a closet, it had all the birth certificates in there. And we didn't realize it was gone. And so we decided to look for it, the kids were all married and gone. And so they were all able to get their birth certificates locally, all San Jose. But mine had to come from down south, took a little bit longer and I just got it not too long ago. We lived in Norwalk. You learn things as you go along.

That's true. And did you have siblings?

Mmhm. And he [Earl] comes from a family of boys, I come from a family of girls. There were four of us.

Four girls. What were your sisters' names?

Masako is the oldest one, she still lives on 18th Street. Chiyako is the second one. She lived on the east side but she passed away. And then I was the third one and then my youngest sister was born in Tule Lake. And she

lives on Second Street near Japantown.

So the family is still around here, which is really great. So you were very young when Pearl Harbor happened. But you were in elementary school, right? Or did you start school already?

I don’t recall.

Do you remember anything about that day or at that moment?

No. Nothing at all. There may be some memories from back there, but nothing pertaining to the war, the incarceration. For some reason, I really don't know why, but my parents moved south, evacuated to my mother's cousin's place in Selma. We used to visit there during summer time. For whatever reason we moved over there. There must be a reason, but my parents are gone so there is no one to ask anymore. Anyway, so we moved over there and from there we went to camp.

So we ended up in Fresno assembly center. And then from there we went to Jerome, Arkansas. And then to Rohwer. I don't know why we went to Rohwer. And I guess that's when my dad was a no/no. The infamous no/no. And so we went to Tule Lake. And that’s the end of it. That’s enough [*laughs*].

Well there’s a lot there. So starting with Fresno, do you remember anything about living there?

I used to have two Betsy Wetsy dolls. And no one else did. And I was the envy of everybody. Of the little kids that knew me. So you know, who else had two of them, let alone one! But that's about the only thing I really remember.

So two Betsy Wetsy dolls. Can you describe what that is?

It's a little rubber doll, and I guess that you put water and squeeze it out of the bottom. They probably don’t make that anymore.

How funny! So do you remember that trip, at all? From Fresno to

Arkansas?

I remember the Mississippi River. And that's about all I remember. I don't remember the train ride or anything, just going over the river. Jerome. Let's see, I guess I don't really remember Jerome. I remember a little bit of Rohwer. Nothing academic! [*laughs*]

That's okay. So by this point you're probably about seven or eight, at Rohwer?

I guess so.

So you were in school. What was a typical day for you? Was it fun? Were you playing with a lot of kids?

I had a lot of fun because I didn't know what was going on otherwise. And I really don't remember school. I keep saying I remember we had a garden in front of the house. And we had Morning Glory, the flower? It's just kind of dumb. We'd get the flower and then you put it in your mouth, and blew into it and then it'd pop in your face. [*laughs*]

Oh really? It does that?

That's about the only thing I remember!

So at some point then, the questionnaire came out and it was your father that answered no/no.

He didn't want to go into service and leave my mom with three kids. By then it was just three girls. And so I think, my impression was that was one of the reasons he didn't want to go, but there were probably some other reasons. That was a nicer reason.

So Tule Lake then, that's so drastic from Rohwer. What do you remember about living there?

Well for me it wasn't drastic because it was another camp, another place to move to. Why, we didn't know. At that age, I had no idea why we did it. Now

I know. But for me it was still fun and games. Because one thing, I took odori lessons, it was way out in another block. And the ironic thing is Lynn has Natori with the same teacher.

Oh wow! The same teacher?

The same teacher.

That's amazing.

Yeah, it is! The only thing I remember about odori is you put the kimono on this way, you hold it this way, and you sit down. And so if anyone is dressed the wrong way at obon, is "Oh, she doesn't know how to dress herself!" Because I know it's supposed to be this way. [*laughs*] I don't know how old I was then, but that is the only thing that I remember.

Now, I think you had mentioned that your father wanted to go back to Japan. What do you remember about that conversation or, when did you find out that he wanted to return?

Well, I just found out the other day that apparently he must have been sending most of his earnings back to Japan. Because he had a home built there. And I just found out that his brother with his children had gone to Japan, and they were there at the time but they were supposed to come back on the last ship. So they couldn't. And we were supposed to come on that same ship and go [back] to Japan. But then all that, kaput. So I just found that out, talked to my sister the other night, in preparation for this. Because of the questionnaire, there is so much that I don't know. And so I thought I'd pick her brain. And she let me know about all of those things, which is very interesting. I didn't know we were supposed to go. Imagine though they couldn't come back because the war started then. So then they couldn't come back and we couldn't go. So, here we are.

So what do you remember when he found out or discovered that they attacked Hiroshima and they dropped the bomb? Did you have family there?

Oh yeah. I lost a cousin. And a friend that was supposed to come back. They had a daughter that died in the -- I guess she was at school. And I guess my mom's house in Hiroshima was on the other side of the mountain or something, and so they didn't get affected.

So after that, do you know if your mother or father talked about how Hiroshima was just devastated and did that change the way they saw their life in the United States?

I never even thought of it.

It was just their circumstance. So you were in Tule Lake and then the war ended. And so what do you remember about coming back, out of camp? Where did you end up?

We had no place to go. So my dad had signed up to go work on the railroads. And apparently my mother's sister, who lives in San Lorenzo, must've invited us to live with them. And so instead of going to build railroads, which I don't know where it was supposed to be, we ended up in San Lorenzo. That was where we went right after the war.

And what do you remember about living there?

That was just fun and games. I remember reading, I guess I just liked to read. And I read about a "Tilly" in a book. And my sister's name was always Takako, my younger sister, and I wanted to name her Tilly. And my dad said, "Go ahead." And good thing it was chosen by somebody [else]. And so she is Karen instead of Tilly. But if I'd had it my way, she would have been Tilly because I read about Tilly in a book. [*laughs*]

Was this your baby sister that was born in camp?

Yes, so she just went by Takako until then. And she got named Karen Ann. I don't know where that was but it was in San Lorenzo or thereafter.

And you had to go back to school? So you were in middle school?

I don't know grade, about second, third grade maybe?

And was that still fun?

There was no problem. And I had *hakujin* friends and all that, no Japanese friends. We could visit their homes and all of that. And you know, it was no problem at all.

How did your parents get back on their feet after coming back and living in San Lorenzo?

I guess my aunt and uncle had a nursery there, carnations, at that time. And the way I heard it, they read in some paper about the sharecropping in Santa Clara Valley. And so we came to Madrone and we sharecropped with Driscoll for four years. And after that we went to Coyote, for another four years, with the same Driscoll and sharecropping. So and that's when in Madrone I was in grammar school and I remember in high school I was in Coyote.

So they went right back into farming?

Got into strawberries.

So where did you grow up from when you were in high school, where were you living?

Where my nephew lives now. That's the home that we built, my dad built. And interesting thing is, his [Earl's] brother was an architect. And I didn't even know him then. And his other brother Johnny, he was the architect. He lived right across the street from us. And then, a block behind him was Herman who was into basketball. He was a farmer and all of that but he was into basketball.

So you knew Earl's brothers just before you met Earl?

Yeah. Well, I didn't really know them, you know, but I knew he was the architect. And I knew that his brother lived behind him. And I met him [Earl].

So you were in San Jose, and did you go to college? Did you go to

school?

Ok. That's very interesting. I went to Heald's in San Francisco, business school. My sister, I guess she was there too, I can't remember, but she was living in San Francisco, also. And I, what do you call that, when you live in a house with a hakujin, with a family? There is a phrase for that, I can't remember what it was.

Kind of like a live-in domestic?

Yeah. Anyway, I lived with this family. And then they were a few blocks from Heald's. So I went to Heald's for two months. Became a comptometer, instead of an adding machine. Stupid, why am I doing this? So, without telling my parents, I got a job at Fort Mason. So I worked up in San Francisco for a few years.

And the problem was, which I didn't know, but I thought it was a government job. But we were in the ship's stores on the MSTS boat, which is not the SS boat, ship. So I was in civil service because I was paid out of the profits from our store. To me it was a military position, because it was transporting military people. But they had a civilian crew. And for whatever reason, I wasn't paid by the U.S. government, I was paid by their profits. So when I came back here, I had no civil service backing. If I had had that, I would have had a few years of civil service and all that kind of stuff. And by then I just got a regular job.

I see. What did you end up doing?

I worked for an electrical company on Commercial Street.

And did your parents just stay in San Jose for the rest of their lives?

At the farm, yeah. And my dad, I don't know how he met this person. But he got a job at a country club, as a gardener there. And it was real close to where we lived, so it was real nice. And that's where he was employed.

I see. And then what about your mom? What did she do?

She worked at Mayfair packing shed. In camp, she took *ikebana*, and learned how to sew. She was talented. Very capable. We never got to her level, I mean we tried [*laughs*].

She was maybe artistic or she was creative?

Yeah. She just had everything. She was just smarter.

Now when the redress came, what were your feelings about receiving redress?

A side story is, we had this mailman, and he knew we had the [Santo Market] store. And when the redress came, they said they'd put it in our mailbox. And he brought it to our store, which I think is a "no no." But that's besides the point.

In terms of your feelings about receiving it, what did you feel?

I had no feelings because I had no bad feelings while I was in camp. So it was like a gift.

Did you find a sense of closure with it or the apology?

No, I just said thank you. My mom bought a car.

Good for her. Is there anything else about your memories of camp that you want to share?

Well, if you know Tule Lake, Castle Rock? I climbed that. That's my main recollection there.

Have you attended a pilgrimage?

We went back once. And so I told Earl,"I climbed that!"

So Helen, you mentioned that you lived very close to his family, right? So how did you both meet?

Helen: I just remember in a bowling alley. Chiyako introduced us, my sister

introduced us. Did I know you until then?

Earl: Probably not. No. I don't remember.

Helen: That's all I remember, we were in a bowling alley.

So how old were you at the time?

Helen: Early 20s.

Earl: I think so, yeah.

Was it like a group or community outing, or were you just out?

No. We were just walking by and he was walking by and she introduced us.

I see.

And that was it. Nothing romantic or anything [*laughs*].

It was all really by chance.

Really, really.

Was part of the reason you came back to San Jose is because you got married? Did you know you wanted to come back here?

It was because of him.

Right. And Earl, by this time you had been really helping with the store.

Earl: Yes.

So you've inherited the legacy of the store, I guess. And it is now in your hands or in the hands of your family. Did you ever feel like this is such an important family thing that we have to hold on to?

Earl: Well, let's see. I recall that, as my kids were growing up, I think I tried to make it a point that they all go to college and take whatever they like and then as far as the store, whoever might want to come back, welcome them.

But I didn’t want to force anybody to come back to that.

How many children do you have?

Four. Two girls and two boys. Lynn’s the oldest. And then the two boys and Leslie is the youngest.

And what are your son’s names?

Mark and Scott. Mark is back at the store.

And you have grandchildren?

Earl: Yes, nine.

So, what do you want them to know about your life experience? Is there something you want them to know about what you went through?

The Santo Market in 2019

Helen: I don’t know. We don’t really talk about anything.

Earl: I’m trying to think of something. Well, I guess, like I mentioned, it was up to the kids to work out for a while and see how they like that and then we welcome them back. The only thing is, we’ve got everybody working hard [*laughs*]. It's not just Mark, but they spend a lot of time at the store. And Les has been taking over the accounting with the computer and stuff. And would you know that I had no background in bookkeeping? So, I remember going to night school at San Jose High, I don't know how long, because my uncle's bookkeeping system was a tablet of names and how much he spent. That’s about it, you know. So, anyway, I sort of changed the accounting a little and of course it has changed again with the computer.

And just a question about San Jose Japantown. What are your hopes for the community here?

Earl: I think we've got to help the community wherever or however we can. And it is to our benefit, too that people come in for different activities. The two churches are right there in town too, so. That makes a lot of difference for us, too. It brings in customers and possibly some of the new people that move into town, they come into the different activities and then it pays off for everyone.

That's good, yes.

Helen: Lynn has the Lotus Preschool and all of their families consider us family too. So, part of her family, I guess. And so some of her children, who are preschool children, even come to the Buddhist Church, even though, you know, they are not even Japanese. And so, uh, and then they greet us personally, which is real nice. So we're the grandparents but they're still our kids too, the little ones. So that's kind of special too.

Very. Well, people really love the market. And it's just so iconic and you're a big part of Japantown.

Earl: Yeah, I think we've seen a lot of changes in the business. And if you don't change with the times, you fall out of it. I think right now it's the deli type of thing that's really good. We could sell rice and shōyu, I think, but those are all available in any supermarket nowadays.

Very different from when you said your uncle was struggling to find rice and shōyu. Is there anything else either of you want to share about anything?

Helen: Talking about education, neither of us graduated from college. We made sure all of our kids had a full college education and they're self-sustaining. And I don't know about him, but I am proud of that. I'm proud of my kids that they're accomplishing things. Anyway I'm happy with what they've all accomplished. And they're all following through with this. I am proud of them. All of them.